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## "GREEK VASES"

### I INTRODUCTION

R. M. Riefstahl

In a time when momentary or unpremeditated effects are considered paramount artistic virtues - witness the French impressionists' action painting and the rage for pottery inspired by Japanese folk wares - the study and appreciation of Greek Vases has become restricted to a few die hard classical scholars and connoisseurs.

This state of affairs is rather a pity, because these sophisticated wares - notice they are generally called vases, not pots - can teach us lessons of an orderly existence which we might well try to emulate.

The same attitudes which produced the great monuments of Greek architecture, drama, and poetry are epitomized in Greek Vases - clarity of outline, economy of means, and an underlying unity of form, function, and decoration.

A Greek Vase may be likened to a Bach suite. Just as the musical forms of Bach had their origins in folk songs and dances, but were refined and reformed into an artistically coherent whole by an expressive creative logic, so did the elegant types of Greek Vases in form and technique originate in earlier folk wares of the Mycenaean and Geometric periods.

A look at Japanese wares shows a use of clay which reveals its dynamic plastic properties in a moist state. While quite refined in their own terms, the throwing marks on the surfaces of these pots would not have satisfied the late Archaic and classical Greek potters who sought to embody timeless, static canons of form in their products.

Hence, they realized that the best way to achieve these effects of repose was to work the clay not in a plastic, but in a stiff, semi-hardened state when the emotion - charged spirals of throwing marks could be tooled away leaving the closest approach to ideal form possible in a tangible material.

Yet, these Greek Vases are not lifeless. Small individual variations of form and decoration give each potter's work resilience and personality, expressing the Greek cultural ideal of individual liberty controlled by a rational, concise concept of order.

We must then try to judge the merit of Greek Vases in terms of their own cultural environment, not looking for the "happy accident" of a dribbled glaze or random impurity so sought after by Japanese potters. There are no "happy accidents" in Greek Vases. Imperfect products were destroyed and only those which demonstrated a high level of artistic mastery and technical control were preserved. Greek standards were probably higher than ours in respect to Greek Vases; many of the examples now preserved in museums were assembled from the broken fragments found in discard dumps.

Mar 1961



## II. TECHNIQUE

Although modern science and archaeology have shed some light on how the Greeks made their wares, we are still not certain of some points. These technical notes are therefore only tentative.

### Forming:

Wheel thrown (sometimes in sections) of fairly fine clay body; then "laths" trimmed by hand for crisp profile.

### Decoration:

True vitreous glazes not used. (vitreous glazes known in Egypt and Near East but apparently did not appeal to the Greek sense of clarity and order) So-called "glaze" on Greek pots is actually super fine clay particles and not silica (glass). As used by the Romans, called "terra sigellata".

Colors probably made as follows:

Black - iron added if not naturally present in clay  
(sometimes also manganese ore)

Red --- iron and ochre added

Purple- manganese ore added

White - super fine pipe-clay (Kaolin) used

Red lines on black grounds usually scratched through the clay body instead of being painted on. Terra Sigellata often rubbed or burnished for added polish.

Alkali used as sintering (fusing) agent.

### Firing:

Fired at low temperatures to produce porous, friable ware. Temperatures near those of modern low bisque firing. Such temperatures are best for production of best color of body and decoration.

Temperature ranges:

800-950 centigrade; 1450-1750 fahrenheit; cone 08-014

Wares fired in one three cycle firing.

Cycles:    1. Oxidized to mature body  
            2. Reduced to mature black decoration  
            3. Reoxidized to mature red decoration, if any

Oxidized firing yields carbon dioxide and produces ferric oxide (buff red) from iron. Reduced firing yields carbon monoxide to produce ferrous oxide (shiny black) from iron. Oxidized firing accomplished by allowing air in kiln, reduced by excluding it.

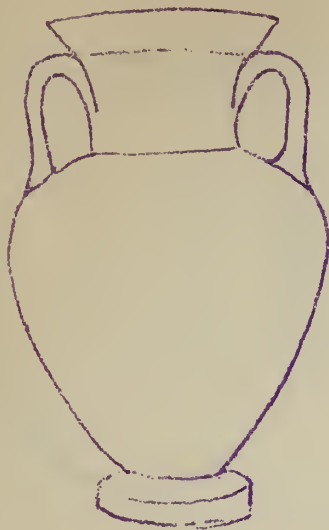


# NAMES AND SHAPES OF GREEK VASES

AMPHORA--for holding oil, wine,  
and water

PELIKE--variant form  
of amphora

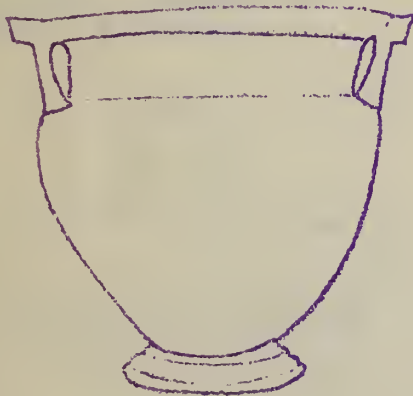
STAMNOS--for wine



KRATER-- for mixing wine and water  
Column Krater

Calyx Krater

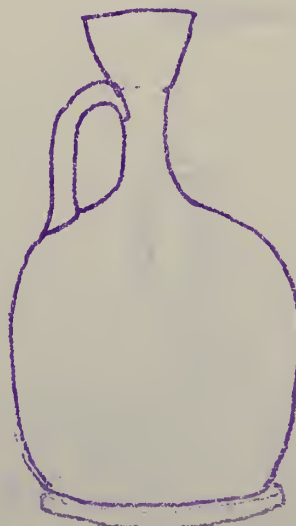
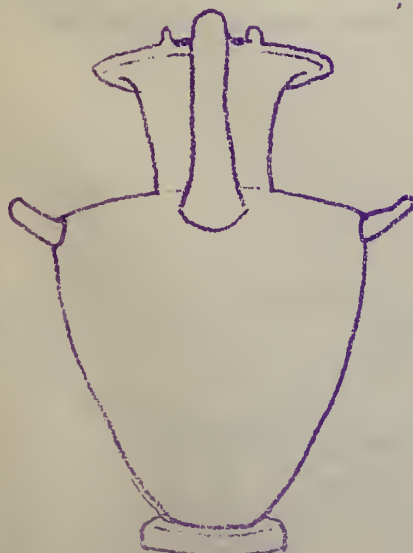
Bell Krater



HYDRIA--for water

LEKYTHOS--for oil and unguents. Often  
used as offering for dead

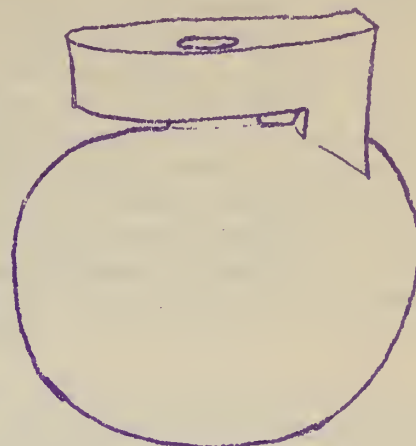
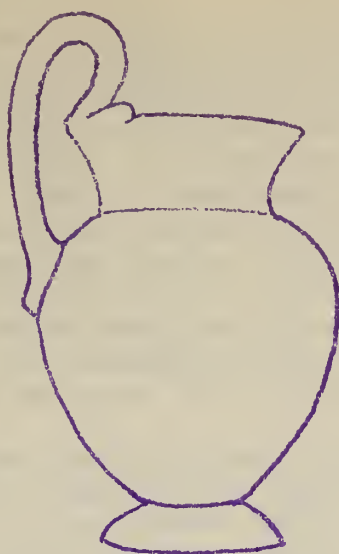
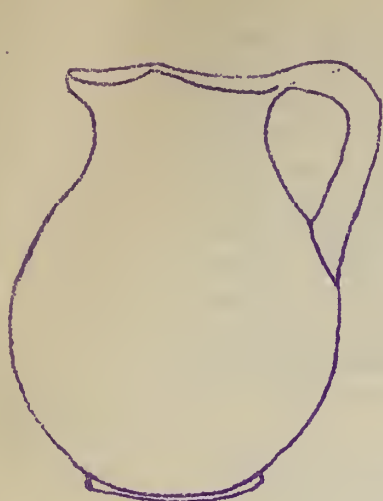
ALABASTRON--for  
perfume





OINOCHOE---for ladling and pouring wine. Often used  
for tomb offerings

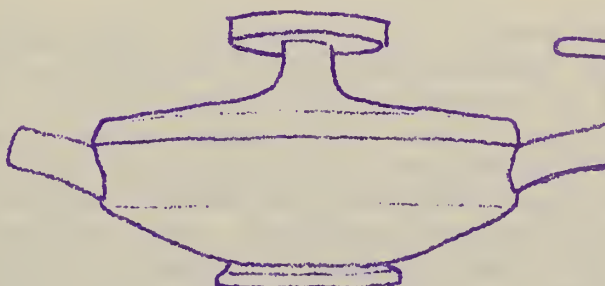
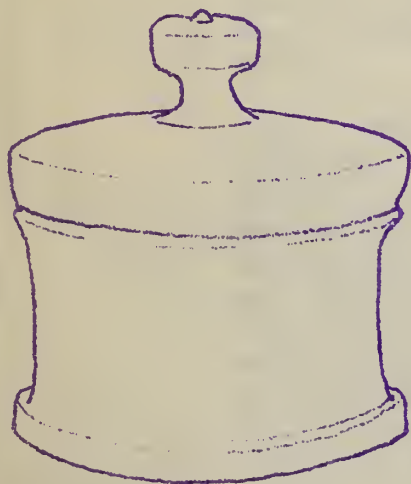
ARYBALLOS---for oil. Commonly  
used by athletes



PYXIS---for cosmetics and  
toilet articles

LEKANIS---probably for food &/or  
small articles

SKYPHOS (Kotyle)---cup  
for drinking



KYLIX---for drinking wine mixed with water

KANTHAROS--- for drinking



PINAX--- i. e., a plate



#### IV. HISTORICAL OUTLINE

Sometimes in small bands who settled peaceably, sometimes in great waves that disrupted all previous settlement, the many tribes of Hellenes expanded southwards through what we now call Greece. Their migrations may have begun about 1700 B.C. The Minoan civilization of Crete was then at its height, secure in its sea-power, freely creative in all branches of art. When the kings of Mycenae on the Greek mainland came to dominate a loose confederacy of lesser chieftains, they derived the equipment of culture from Crete. At length, about 1400 B.C., they set sail for Crete and overthrew the Minoan Kingdom. A common Mycenaean (or so-called 'Helladic') culture now spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean.

Hellenic peoples still pressed down into Greece from the north, or sought fresh land in the Aegean Islands and the foreshores of Asia Minor. The Trojan War, sung by Homer, was an episode of this expansion; perhaps about 1200-1150 B.C., Agamemnon of Mycenae led a federation of bronze-clad chieftains to crush a centre of Asiatic resistance. But Agamemnon's successors at Mycenae in turn succumbed to a final wave of northern invaders called the Dorians, formidable warriors with superior swords of iron. The Dorians slowly blotted out the old Minoan-Mycenaean-Helladic civilization of the Aegean. When a new Iron-Age culture started, from very humble beginnings, it was definitely Greek.

About this time, say 1100-900 B.C., three branches of the Hellenic race won homes on the Asia Minor coast: to the north the Aeolians, to the south the Dorians; in the middle the more active Ionians, whose chief city was Miletus. These settlers intermarried with their Asiatic neighbours, and mixed blood may have aided the precocious intellectual development of 'Eastern Greece'. Here the Greek voice first spoke to the world through the mouths of Homer, the lyric poets of Lesbos, and the natural philosophers of Ionia. And the Ionians contributed much to Greek art. They seem to have inherited something of the Minoan delight in fleeting appearance, in surface pattern, in vivacious movement; and from the art of their Asiatic neighbours they derived a feeling for soft and rounded plastic forms. A contrasting preference for hard, close-knit, intellectually-conceived forms developed in the Peloponnese and other lands where the people were mainly Dorian. It was eventually left to the Athenians, themselves Ionian by race, to reconcile and fuse the Dorian and Ionian strains in the mature art of the fifth century.

Greece again expanded in the two centuries 750-550 B.C. Colonies were sent out by individual city-states of Eastern and Mainland Greece, seeking land to cultivate as well as trade. In the Eastern Mediterranean the chain extended all round the coasts of Thrace and the Black Sea, and along southern Asia Minor as far as Poseidon (All Mina) near Syrian Antioch. Two settlements lodged in Egypt, Cyrene and two other colonies in Libya. To the west, the chain embraced the heel and toe of Italy as far as Cyme, near-Cyme, near Naples, and the whole coast of Sicily except the western corner. The



East-Greek cities sent even more colonies to the west than Mainland cities such as Corinth; indeed, the most astonishing venture was that of Phocaea, which from Asia Minor colonized Menoikos (Monaçò), Nicaea (Nice), Antipolis (Antibes), Massilia (Marseilles), and even Emporiae (Ampurias) in Spain. Greek merchantmen swept the Black Sea and Mediterranean from end to end, in rivalry with the Phoenicians based on Tyre and Sidon in the east, and on Carthage, Tunisia, and western Sicily in the west. Native peoples were on the whole friendly to the small Greek city-states on their coasts, for the advantages of trade were mutual. In return for minerals and agricultural produce, Greek ships brought wine, oil, and manufactured articles. Of the last, good pottery was one of the most considerable items. It has been found wherever there were Greek colonies and far in their hinterland.





Historically speaking, fine pottery made by the Greeks between 1000 and 400 B.C. falls into four main groups. Before 700 B.C. wares painted in brown or black monochrome with geometric decoration were made in many localities and exported only within a narrow radius. In the seventh century, pottery, and Greek art generally, underwent profound modifications owing to trade contacts with Egypt, Phoenicia, and the inland peoples of Asia. Textiles, carved ivory, and above all metal objects found their way into the cities of Eastern and Mainland Greece, where their stylized ornament of human, animal and plant-forms encouraged potters to abandon the old geometrical designs. This orientalising phase of the seventh century saw also the introduction of polychrome painting and the 'black figure' technique, wherein black-painted silhouette figures were enriched with detail incised in the yet unfired clay. Eastern Greece preferred pure brush-painting; on the Mainland, Corinth in particular developed the incised black-figure. The main factories now supplied a very wide export-trade. The sixth century, until about 530, was the flowering of the mature black-figure technique; Athenian potters now captured the foreign markets from Corinth; and the brush-painted wares of Eastern Greece fell into decline. From about 530 until 400 B.C. Athenian pottery alone deserves consideration, most of it being painted in the red-figure technique of figures reserved in a black-painted ground.

(Taken from Lane PP. 18-20, see Bibliography.)

#### V. SUBJECT MATTER OF VASE PAINTING

The subject matter of Greek Vase painting is rich and varied, presenting a summary of Greek life and thought. Religious ritual was closely bound up in everyday life - much more so than today. The gods were invoked not only at weddings, funerals, etc., but also at athletic contests, banquets, and at public fountains.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find diverse subjects on vases of single type - on a Kylix for instance. Dionysos, the god of wine, may be represented; or a scene of festivity; or some political topic as might be discussed at a banquet. All these subjects are appropriate to the use of the vessel. This is an important point. The best Greek vase painters tried to relate the subject of their decoration to the use of the particular type of pot, as well as harmonizing composition and style with its form. This is but another instance of the Greek artist's desire to express himself rationally and coherently within a unified and disciplined outlook.

Historically speaking, the range of subjects varies a good deal. In geometric and orientalising wares subjects are usually horses, riders, or animals in continuous friezes and in smaller vessels fantastic beasts - gryphons and harpies - singly or in small groups.



On Black Figured wares Dionysiac revels or scenes from Heroic legends, particularly Herakles and Theseus who were favorites of the Athenian predominate.

In contrast, new themes enter in developed Red Figure wares - scenes of daily life - banquets, revels, etc. and single figures of animals, birds and athletes. On small cups the Athenian owl frequently appears. One group of Vases called Panathenaic amphorae were awarded as prizes in athletic contests. On one side they bear a representation of Athene in whose honor the games were held and on the other a scene of the type of contest - chariot race, discus throwing, wrestling match, etc. for which the prize amphora was awarded.

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